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THE THREE BEETHOVENS

By JAMES FREDERICK ROGERS

“A man’s biography should be written by his physician.”

“In the hidden bond between the soul and the body lies the solution of opposing aspirations.”—*Tolstoi*.

“Matter and mind form one another, i.e., they give to one another the form in which we see them. They are the helpeets to one another that cross each other and undo each other, and, in the undoing, do and, in the doing, undo, and so see-saw *ad infinitum*.”—*Butler*.

THE classification of Beethoven’s works into three styles probably originated with Fétis in his article on the composer in the “*Biographie Universelle des Musiciens*.” It was Lenz, the Russian, who took the matter most seriously and, in 1852, published two volumes in support of his thesis and in evidence, at least, of his own inability to appreciate the compositions of the third period. His countryman, Oulibicheff, took up the cudgel, especially as regards the quality of the third style, and issued his rejoinder: *Beethoven, ses critiques et ses glossateurs*, in 1857. Since that time hardly a writer who has more than mentioned Beethoven has failed to speak of the “three styles” and to give his own opinion in the matter. Possibly the dimensions of Lenz’s thesis seemed, to every subsequent writer, to render his contention worthy consideration, or, like the Bacon-authorship-of-Shakespeare nonsense, it must be at least mentioned lest the critic seem ignorant of its existence.

The theory of the three styles by set periods probably had its origin in the division by Schindler of his biography of Beethoven into three periods. Such periods being furnished by one intimate with his life, it was natural enough and logical to find three qualities of work arising from them, though the defining of the quality of the work in the different epochs, was, of course, quite another matter. In his introduction to the Life of Beethoven (1840) Schindler says: “I follow a division not arising out of the history of the development of his genius, but purely from the various phases of his life, such as Beethoven himself would have adopted; that is to say, I divide his life and works into three periods; the first extending from his birth to the year 1800, the second from 1800 to October, 1813, and the third from the last mentioned date

to his death, in 1827." "It must be obvious," he adds in a note, "that in this division, I do not mean to assert that Beethoven's mental development admits of the like limitation, or is tacitly comprehended under it. To pretend to fix precise limits to that would be a bold attempt." Apparently Schindler himself had no intention of classifying Beethoven's works or his working capacity to fit the divisions of his biography, though no one would expect the productions of one period to quite resemble those of another, since these must reflect in musical thought the experience of the hour.

This assertion brings up the subject of thought and especially "musical thought" for consideration, with the relation of thought to bodily states as well as to life events of a more directly psychic appeal. If any of Beethoven's works, especially those of his later years, were obscure, by what were they made so, and is the thought obscure or the expression of it unsatisfactory?

Many attempts have been made to define thought. Webster calls it in one paragraph "the act or state of thinking; mental concentration on ideas as distinguished from sense perception or emotions." Not very illuminating and too much resembling a cat chasing its tail, and the latter part seemingly carries with it the slur, not so commonly heard as formerly, that "musicians do not think." And this from a dictionary-maker who, in his youth, was the leader of a drum corps! If we look up the word "idea" we find a column of explanations without enlightenment, until we reach—"Idea, according to *Humean Philosophy*,"—that it is "a mental structure or content which is a less vivid copy of some original sensation, emotion or volition," in other words a symbolic reflection of a genuine experience. Mental states charged with emotion (and such is musical thought) were not looked down upon by Hume. And this definition fits in with modern psychological study and helps to lift the stigma applied not so long since, that the science of mind was a miserably small candle held over a desperately dark abyss. So it was, until it took the body into account,—until it recognized the indissoluble partnership in all its transactions. There are no alterations of mental states without bodily changes, and no bodily changes again without feeling of some sort. "Even the simplest and apparently driest notions," said Lotze, "are never quite destitute of attendant feeling," and Knowlson, who attempted the difficult task of telling us how to think, comments: "It is likewise true that when we examine our feelings we find they contain much of what is otherwise called thought." "Feeling is subjective experience *par excellence*," says

Sully. And, on the bodily side, "Thinking," writes Nadal, in a recent issue of the *Journal de Médecine de Bordeaux*, "is a product of the sensations which reach the consciousness from all parts and promote or check the mysterious fermentations of the sub-conscious. Thought is actually a secretion of the body as a whole." If thought is a secretion of the body as a whole, it is modified, especially on the emotional side, by its ever-varying states. The body becomes, under varying conditions, the medium of thought which flows from no one knows whence. The man of genius recognizes (Beethoven especially acknowledged this) that he is but the instrument—the oil and wick—through which, by special permission (often abundantly paid for in suffering), the infinite mind reveals itself in larger measure. Such thought flows in and through all of us; but the special vehicle of expression—the genius, we rightly speak of as "inspired."

Continuous and elaborate thought, slightly or highly charged with emotion, is impossible without a set of symbols which make up verbal or musical language, and that another may appreciate the thought, he must be conversant with the symbols used, as well as in sympathy with the ideas, musical or other, which are expressed. If musical thought is incomprehensible to the hearer, either the thought may be outside his experience or the language is imperfect. Sometimes, also, a writer is more enamored of the means of expression than of the thought that comes to him, and with sad results, for, though by its use language "is the servant, and necessary servant of thought, by its abuse it becomes the compère or even the supplanter of thought."

Thought, and the language of thought, of one man appeals only to those of similar life experiences. Not every man responds to Bach, and some prefer the thought and expression of thought (the expression being always more or less one with the thought) of a Strauss or a Debussy or a Wagner to a Beethoven. It is only for the hearer to whom the composer appeals to judge of the progress or decay of his productions. If Beethoven, to his sympathizer, is greatest in his second period, it is because he was then, in bodily machinery taken as a whole, at his best. If his later works, the sonatas and quartettes, really *are* cloudy, either he did not himself see his way clearly or the means of expression were slipping from his grasp in bodily decay.

Beethoven is by no means the first man to have his "styles,"—to have his works classified by the critics as flowing from the pens of very different or very much altered personalities. It is but to be expected that the works of every man whose career has not

been suddenly terminated by death at the height of his fame, should at least fall into three groups: the immature, those of his highest development, and, those of his decline, though it might be difficult to draw dividing lines.

The man who most recently has been separated into personalities (due to a critical light lit by the flame of war) is Carlyle. G. M. Trevelyan, in "The Two Carlyles," sees a quite different seer from the author of *Sartor Resartus* and the *French Revolution* in the writer of *Frederick the Great*. Accounting for Carlyle's change of attitude toward society, he says, "Much, I am sure, was due to physical and physiological change wrought in him by advancing years. This was the chief, though possibly not the only reason, why Wordsworth wrote glorious poetry between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, and mild verses for Sunday School from thirty-five to eighty, with appalling results on the large volume known and loved by us as his Poetical Works. 'The unimaginable touch of time' affected Carlyle differently but no less strongly. His style and humor were little affected; it was his temper and doctrines that suffered. His later doctrines are the vent he found for the ill temper of his declining years, a dyspeptic old man's failure to endure the diseases his flesh was heir to with the stern but kindly courage with which he had borne them in his youth. After all, the first Carlyle was fifty years of age before he passed away."

Since all mental production proceeds from, or is coincident with, physiologic functioning, it is evident enough, as Trevelyan points out, that, if there are two Carlyles or two Wordsworths, some physiologic change has come about. If we may trust Froude, Carlyle's sufferings were the product of a too vivid and self-critical imagination, but this does not accord with the man as we know him from his earlier works; besides, the imagination is, as has been pointed out, a function of the body and as certainly reacts upon it. The notion that a rat is gnawing at our vitals, produces the same effect as would a real rat chewing away upon our haslet. A sour spirit begets, by physiologic law, a sour stomach, and a continued dyspepsia from some other cause will unfailingly react upon the mind, in kind. The imagination gets the clew from some outside source, and in Carlyle that source must have been a bodily one. Huxley, at sixty, had an illness the effect of which was "that for the first time in his life he began to shrink involuntarily from assuming responsibilities and from appearing on public occasions." "I have been in a disgusting state of blue devils lately. Can't make out what it is; for I really have nothing

the matter except a strong tendency to put the most evil construction upon everything." There was something very much the matter, and no one would attribute it in Huxley to "mere imagination." The depressing nerve impulses set up in Carlyle's "diabolical arrangement called a stomach" and constantly flooding his seat of consciousness, were enough to change his personality.

In connection with these war-born discussions of Carlyle which have filled many magazine pages, the unsympathetic damning him pro-German, his admirers defending him in whole or accounting for his autocratic sentiments as does Trevelyan, it is to be noted that Beethoven also had his political notions, most democratic ones, and that his thought on the emotional side was embodied in the Heroic symphony. His chagrin, when his hero was unmasked, did not sour him against society nor, after its dedication was erased, was it any the worse as a political document expressed in tones.

To return to Beethoven of the three styles, is there a physiological basis for the sharp division of his works? Naturally the compositions of his youth do not equal those of his maturity, for Beethoven's was a development in season, and not after the magic Mozartian fashion. Nor could his foolish parent push nature in the matter. At seventeen Beethoven was "troubled with asthma" and he went through a period (not uncommon in the lives of great men) of depression from fear of a decline into consumption, the disease by which his mother had just been taken from him. About the same time troublesome digestive disorders, destined to dog him all his days (as possibly did asthma), began to make their appearance.

Deafness began to be noticed about 1797 or possibly earlier. In 1800 (beginning of the period of "second style") he writes, "my hearing has become weaker in the last three years, and this infirmity was in the first instance caused by my bowels, which, as you know were already, in the past, in a wretched state, but here I am constantly afflicted with diarrhea, which produces great weakness." And, about the same time, "for the last two years I have avoided all society, for it is impossible for me to say to people, I am deaf." So far as the attribution of his deafness to his diarrhea is concerned, Beethoven doubtless got the idea from some of those earlier body-menders who tinkered at his troubles only to make them worse. In 1802 he wrote, "For the last six years I have been in a wretched condition." Wretched indeed, with so sensitive a nature, and it was in the same year that he wrote "the will."

Apparently here was a poor specimen of a human machine for producing the bravest of musical works, but the "Heroic" symphony was not composed until 1804 or 1805. The fact is that Beethoven was just expanding into the most robust manhood and was possessed of a constitution upon which neither asthma, organs of digestion with which he was constantly on bad terms, nor even deafness (after the first bitter onset) could make much impression even with his otherwise extremely sensitive nature. It was the Beethoven of this period that seemed "power personified," as if "in that limited space was concentrated the pluck of twenty battalions." This was the man who every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, "half walked, half ran" for five miles into the country or twice about the ramparts of Vienna. Only one bubbling over with energy finds pleasure in so much spontaneous motion under his own steam. How many of us puny mortals are so vigorous? That he took his exercise immediately after dinner showed that his meals did not disturb him greatly. From 1800 to 1813, Schindler's Second Period, there was a steady decline of his powers of hearing, and his playing in public was becoming unsatisfactory, at least for others, but we have no knowledge that his disappearance as executant was disappointing to himself.

A more significant event marking the beginning of the third epoch was the death of his brother Carl, and his assumption of the care of his unfortunate nephew. Whatever epithets we may bestow upon this youth, we are doubtless deeply indebted to him for the profound passion which welled into Beethoven's music of this period. At least the boy was a stimulus to production, for the good uncle desired to leave him as much money as possible, and many a child of genius has remained unborn for want of such a commonplace cause as insufficient funds.

There is little mention of illness in Beethoven's letters up to 1816. From this time there are numerous notes to Archduke Rudolph apologizing for failure to keep his engagements as tutor to "His Imperial Highness", and in these he invariably complains of ill health. One might suspect here excuses to escape a disagreeable task, but in 1817 (four years after the opening of the "third phase") he wrote to a friend, Countess Erdödy, "I caught a very severe cold which forced me to keep to my bed for a long time, and many months passed before I could venture out. . . *I still feel the effect from it.*" Letters to other friends in this year speak of ill health, but though "not yet quite well," in January, 1818, he must have been quite his usual self again during this and the succeeding year, for it is to these that the Ninth Symphony and Mass in D belong.

In 1821 he had a severe attack of "rheumatism" and in the next year complained of being troubled with "gout in the chest" (asthma?) and only able to work a little, still it is in this year that Julius Benedict saw him and wrote: "Who could ever forget those striking features? The lofty, vaulted forehead with thick gray and white hair encircling it in the most picturesque disorder, that square, lion's nose, that broad chin, that noble and soft mouth; . . . his thick-set Cyclopean figure told of a powerful frame." Outwardly, decay had certainly not set in, but the symptoms of his last illness were evident and from 1822 on, he struggled against fate with the help of powerful powders and medicinal baths. The tenth symphony was sketched but the task of composition (always a toilsome one for the composer) was delayed. A set of quartettes was ordered, and in 1824 and 1825 he composed or completed op. 127, 130 and 132. In 1826 still another, op. 135, was flung off. If these last works reflect more than usual "a heavenly beauty" it was not likely that the composer was aware (save in the way of all thoughtful men) of his approaching end. There is nothing of self-pity or of the morbid in these works. He still had tremendous vitality, for it was more than a year later that he was able to ride for two days in bitter weather, in that "most wretched vehicle of hell." There was a constantly darkening background, however, of mental suffering against which the flame of so heroic a spirit shone constantly brighter. He composed, without difficulty, the finale of one of the quartettes but four months before his end, and even in the last weeks, those about him, in tune from former years with the trend of his thought and its expression, observed that his mind worked as never before, "his overflow of fancy was indescribable, and his imagination showed an elasticity which his friends had noticed but seldom when he was in health." That nothing inferior (especially at this time, for Beethoven had done pot-boilers in his earlier days) would have fallen from his pen is hinted at in his brave remark to the doctors who were tapping him, "Better water from my belly than from my pen!"

Yes, there are three phases to Beethoven's life, or more, if we choose to so punctuate his progress, but commas should be used rather than larger stops. His works make one sentence, wonderfully well-wrought and periodic. Originating in the thought and expressions of his time, and developing apace with his own peculiar progress, they finally merge into a style bathed in a baffling radiance of sunset glow, "mystic, wonderful," belonging to a realm of thought where we find it difficult as delightful to follow. But if we do not comprehend his utterance, there is no

evidence that it was because of confusion of thought or stammering speech on the part of the composer. That such is the case is also indicated by the fact that the productions of Beethoven's earlier as well as his later years are becoming clearer to his hearers and that the number of "obscure" works is diminishing. "We may look upon the great posthumous quartettes of Beethoven as we would view some unexplorable ranges of distant mountain peaks, content that we may see in their beautiful outlines some suggestions of their grandeur, and knowing that, were we brought into close touch with them, our vision could not at the same time comprehend that perfection of curve and colour that entralls us as we gaze, and gives us what seems to be a glimpse of the unattainable and the Eternal."

If Beethoven in his last works overstepped the bounds of his art, as some would say, they were the steps of a still-growing giant of the most robust sort, for whom his art was too limited, but, for that matter, expression is always a limitation of thought. Throughout, and to the last, there is a wonderful robustness in his works which reflected, or was the reflection of (owing upon which side of the shield we cast our glance), the tremendous bodily vitality of the man. The later Wordsworth and the later Carlyle may have degenerated; the later Beethoven did not. Fortunately his bodily machinery was proof against, in fact made possible, all the mental and emotional storms by which it was swept, and was steadied by that supreme faith of his in the management of the universe, a faith which he wove into all his works—more even into those of his last than of his earliest years. Music is as the light of the ideal burning against the background of the real. That background in Beethoven was dark enough, and the light correspondingly radiant. It was fortunate for humanity that his bodily machinery held so strongly that he was able to put into tones the results of his reachings into the unknown. The wonder is that we whose mental sufferings are comparatively slight, can follow him at all in the final flights of his fancy.

If "thought pure and simple is as near to God as we can get," then musical thought must be purest and simplest of all thought. But our Gods are of our own creating,—they grow out of our own experiences. Those who worship the God of Beethoven will always find in the master's last works an "incalculable depth of thought and closeness of texture . . . and the embodiment of a no less incalculable emotional power." With Sir George Grove we can only believe that "he was always in progress."